DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 183 EA 017 724

AUTHOR	Harvey, Glen
TITLE	Recent Reports Concerning Education, or The Road to Nirvana: You Can't Get There from Here.
INSTITUTION	NETWORK, Inc., Andover, MA.
PUB DATE	Apr 84
NOTE	15p.; In its: Implementing the Recommendations of the National Commission and Studies of Education, or What They Failed to Mention (EA 017 723). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (April,1984).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adoption (Ideas); Change Strategies; *Educational Assessment; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Needs; *Evaluation Utilization; Policy Formation; *Research Reports
IDENTIFIERS	*Excellence in Education; National Commission on Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

Recent commission and task force reports calling for educational improvement may carry more weight than their content deserves because of their sources. The findings of these commissions vary since each commission has its own concept of education, its own political purposes, and its own sources of data. Still, their general recommendations stress similar themes common to periods of conservatism. The reports can help identify weaknesses and focus public concern, but fail to offer practical information on change implementation. The reports also tend to disregard research on educational change, in some cases promulgating inappropriate recommendations and in others leaving state and local agencies without appropriate guidelines. The recommendations provided fall into three categories: ideas known to be good but difficult to implement, ideas that are practical but prohibitively expensive, and appealing but empty statements. The reports have led to substantial activity by state legislatures, the impact of which may prove insignificant or even negative. Automatic acceptance of the recommendations may lead to implementation of unsuitable policies, disregard for negative consequences, creation of the illusion of change, the derailing of existing improvement efforts, the loss of gains made in other educational areas, and the inappropriate channeling of scarce energy and resources. (PGD)

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Recent Reports Concerning Education
OR
The Road to Nirvana: You Can't Get There From Here

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April, 1984

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EA 017 724

RECENT REPORTS CONCERNING EDUCATION
OR
THE ROAD TO NIRVANA: YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

Glen Harvey

During the last year, public attention has been riveted on the decline and potential rebirth of American education. Fueled by the National Commission on Excellence in Education's (1983A) charge that the "educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" (p. 5), 1983 witnessed a groundswell of public and political energy and enthusiasm for improving education. With this support for change came seemingly endless reports and sets of recommendations concerning the present and future condition of education from federal, state, and local perspectives. These, in turn, were followed by innumerable synopses and cross analyses of the initial reports, as well as a variety of efforts to translate the recommendations into state, school, and classroom level policies and practices.

With 1983 so clearly being the year when America rediscovered education and its many shortcomings, could 1984 be the year of tangible educational improvement, the year that transcends rhetoric to move forward to actually raise the quality of education? There is, of course, always that possibility. But all the signs are that the well orchestrated publicity and bombast of commissions and task forces have provided only the illusion of change and that the efforts of school officials to implement the highly publicized recommendations of these groups will ultimately result in little, if any, improvement.

The reason for this pessimistic prognosis lies not in the belief that education cannot be improved and that educators are not capable of change. On the contrary, there is abundant evidence that many schools have been successful in their efforts to improve and that educators are eager and willing to raise the quality of education they provide.[1] Rather, the cause for pessimism resides with the task forces and commissions themselves and with the public, political, and professional perceptions of the role such groups play in improving education. Instead of being viewed as one of many <u>means</u> for educational improvement -- as a catalyst for change and a source of ideas about weaknesses and alternative solutions -- the recommendations of these groups are perceived as <u>ends</u>. They are accepted as specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving excellence in education. Yet they disregard entirely how their recommendations are to be

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I would like to thank Wolfgang Gurr of WGH Associates and Pat Cox, David Crandall, and Susan Loucks-Horsley of The NETWORK, Inc. for their suggestions, ideas, and assistance in developing this paper.

implemented -- how individuals ultimately responsible for education might go about trying to improve schools in the ways being suggested. And they ignore much, if not all, that research has taught about how schools have actually been able to change and become more effective. As a result, the reports have created enormous public pressure which functions to push educators forward only to repeat the mistakes of the past, propelling schools toward a false sense of excellence, soon to be dispelled as the recommendations fail to be implemented successfully or do not produce the intended results.

In this series of papers, our purpose is to place the recent commission and task force reports[2] in their proper perspective within the school improvement process and to provide the guidance necessary to maximize the opportunity that a school improvement effort will succeed, regardless of the source of the recommendations being implemented. To accomplish this, I begin in this paper by briefly reviewing the reports -- what they are and are not and what they can and cannot be expected to accomplish. Pat Cox and Susan Loucks-Horsley, in their paper, provide a comprehensive examination of the factors which must be considered if improvement efforts designed to implement the recommendations of these reports are to have any lasting effect. In the final paper, David Crandall describes two complementary scenarios for improving schools, one short term (5 year) scenario involving strategies which accept the current configuration of schools, the other longer term (10 year) scenario utilizing strategies designed to transform the educational enterprise.

On the Road (Again)

While most of the recent critiques of education share a common focus on educational decline and mediocrity and offer recommendations for improvement, they are somewhat more diverse in content and approach than might have been expected. Each begins with a slightly different conception of education and a set of assumptions about the roles of learning and schooling, presents a variety of evidence and arguments to indict American education as at best mediocre, suggests somewhat divergent goals for the educational process, and offers an array of diverse, wide ranging recommendations. Since syntheses of the various studies and reports now abound,[3] the temptation to provide still another detailed synopsis and cross analysis will be resisted. It is important to keep in mind, however, that differences in factors such as target audiences, purposes and intended outcomes, the basis upon which recommendations are made (e.g., research, commissioned papers, existing data, questionnaires, and personal testimony and opinion), and the complexion and nature of the task force/commission membership and funding/sponsorship source all can (and do) have significant impact on the final set of recommendations issued by each of the groups or individual authors, as does the sociopolitical context in which they are issued.

Even with these differences, a few general themes common to most of these reports have emerged. Among these are (a) the need to provide quality education to "all" students;[4] (b) a core curriculum which includes the basics (definitions of which differ); (c) higher standards, requirements, and expectations of/for students; (d) more time spent on instruction; (e) more emphasis on teacher preparation, qualifications, and certification and raising the status (and salaries) of the teaching profession; (f) a recognition that education prepares students for adulthood (with an emphasis in many reports on the relationship between education and America's economic stability and ability to compete; and (g) increased, broadly based, shared responsibility for school improvement, including the private sector and the community.

If these themes sound familiar, it is because they are not entirely new to education. Tyack and James (1983) point out that the most commonly cited recent recommendations fall into a fairly predictable pattern of previous negative assessments of American education. In liberal periods such as the 1930s, 1960s, and early 1970s, education is expected to serve the "disadvantaged," broaden its functions, and overcome rigidity. In conservative times such as the 1890s, 1950s, and 1980s, education is pushed to focus on the "talented," emphasize basics and academics, develop a more cohesive curriculum, and strengthen discipline. Furthermore, in many ways, commissions and task forces tend to reflect current trends rather than create new solutions. According to Theodore Sizer (1983), "task force and commission reports . . . legitimize what the schools have already started doing in response to . . . initial criticism" (p.1).

And if these themes sound vague as well, it is also because they are vague. Many of the reports themselves are at best described as reflecting a level of generality which provides only minimal guidance to schools; none provide the guidance necessary to ensure that their recommendations will be implemented.

In characterizing commission and task force reports of this type, Peterson (1984) suggests that such a report:

- is almost certain to exaggerate the problem it addresses;
- states only broad, general objectives;
- recommends changes that are beyond current technology and resources;
- does not spell out the details of its proposed innovations;
- seldom calls for institutional reorganization; and
- poorly documents the value of the solutions it proposes (pp. 9-10).

This is not to imply that the individual or collective sets of recommendations are without merit. Many ring true, at least in a general sense, and are quite useful in identifying perceived weaknesses in the educational system; indicating areas of public and political concern about particular aspects of education; providing sources of ideas and suggestions for ways to raise the quality of education; and generating a solid basis of support and enthusiasm for actively improving schools. But if the concern is to really achieve excellence in education rather than to simply discuss it -- placating a concerned public and creating issues around which to make political flourishes and promises -- then it is necessary to go well beyond the current commission and task force reports and begin to discuss practically -- in both the short- and long-term -- how schools can (and do) improve the quality of education they provide.

The idea that a critical aspect of successful school improvement is understanding how schools change -- how they successfully implement new practices and programs and how they become more effective -- is not in itself new. Considerable research has been conducted in the areas of implementation, school improvement, knowledge utilization, and effective schools and teachers, which together have yielded an impressive knowledge base which has proven useful not only to researchers but also to people actively involved directly in raising the quality of education. Unfortunately, however, in the rush to respond to the recent critiques of education, particularly the National Commission on Excellence in Education, there has been a tendency to forget -- or ignore -- almost all that has been learned about how to improve education.

It may not appear fair in all cases to criticize the various task forces, commissions, and authors for not including a discussion of this relevant research since for most, if not all, this was not their primary charge. There is justification, however, to question how these groups believe their recommendations are to be translated into practice. This is a particularly appropriate question to raise in connection with the Department of Education's National Commission on Excellence in Education. Secretary of Education Bell has made it clear that his intention is to have state, district, and local officials implement the Commission's recommendations and has orchestrated the publicity surrounding the Commission such that enormous public and political pressure for these recommended improvements has been generated. And yet, the Commission ignored the very research -- much of which was funded by the Department of Education -- which provides insight into how schools could actually go about doing what the Commission recommends.

Ignoring most or all of what is known about school improvement and the change process not only can lead to inappropriate and ill fated responses to the recommendations by state and local educators; it can also result in the recommendations themselves being inappropriate or not feasible. It allows the Commission on

Excellence, for example, to offer at times superficial, unclear recommendations, the practicality, implementation, and consequences of which do not appear to have always been adequately considered. These recommendations, in turn, become credible simply by virtue of their source -- the Secretary of Education's own commission. The pressure to make sense of such recommendations is thus transferred from the Commission to individuals whose days are already more than full with simply coping with the day to day activities of schooling and the multiple constraints which continuously operate to limit the options for improvement. While the finger of blame will be pointed directly at these individuals if their improvement efforts fail, the responsibility for creating a climate fostering rhetorical and illusory change and improvement should be traced to the source of the recommendations themselves -- a source which by virtue of its position and charge, has no accountability for seeing its recommendations translated into practice.

Consider, for example, the five major recommendations of the Commission on Excellence:

- strengthening graduation requirements and course requirements in the "New Basics," which includes computer science;
- more rigorous, measurable standards and higher expectations for academic performance and conduct;
- devoting more instructional time to learning the New Basics, e.g., more effective use of the existing school day, longer day, or lengthened school year;
- improved teacher preparation and teaching profession;[5] and
- accountability of educators and elected officials for providing leadership and of citizens for fiscal support and stability.

On the surface, these recommendations seem reasonable; in the abstract, few people would quarrel with their general thrust. Unfortunately, however, there is little of real substance to these recommendations, once their rhetorical aspects are discounted. In an analysis of six of the recent reports,[6] including that issued by the Commission, Peterson (1984) concludes that the recommendations tend to fall into one of three categories: "wholesome main courses for which no recipe is given; gourmet dishes of extravagant cost; and enticing desserts that . . . turn out to be nothing but sugar and air" (p.6).

Main courses include seemingly reasonable, supportable recommendations concerning classroom management, discipline, and homework -- recommendations many people have endorsed for years but have generally failed to translate into policies and practices which obtain the desired results. Simply continuing to restate good ideas and intentions is unlikely to result in excellent

education unless additional guidance is provided in how these ideas can be moved from the abstract to the concrete. (How to translate these main course staples into effective classroom practices provides much of the focus of the following two papers.)

The gourmet dishes, while more easily identified for what they are -- high cost items practically affordable by only a few -- are somewhat surprisingly among the most popular recommendations, given their accompanying financial burden. These include ideas such as extending the school day and/or year, raising teachers' salaries to a "market-sensitive" level, adopting 11 month teacher contracts, and providing grants and loans in order to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession.

Unlike the main courses and gourmet dishes which at least hold some potential for improving education, the puff pastry desserts are essentially window dressing with no substance. These include appealing -- but empty -- statements such as the Commission on Excellence's so-called "implementing recommendation" that the "teaching of English in high school should equip graduates to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983A, p.25) -- an admirable sentiment but one which under scrutiny has little apparent practical meaning.

The fact that the Commission's (and others') recommendations tend to fall into these less than helpful categories -- and that constraints such as the financial burden of the gourmet delights as well as a variety of other social, political, demographic, economic, resource, and human constraints,[7] severely limit the options for improvement available to educators -- have not eliminated or even lessened the public and political pressure to act on the recommendations. And act is what many states, districts, and local schools have done, although it is not clear where the long-term funding for many of the initiatives is to come from or what tangible improvement-related outcomes are expected.

Much of the effort to respond to the recommendations of the Commission on Excellence has been at the state level. As Gregory Anrig, President of the Educational Testing Service, has pointed out, "reform is being translated into things that can be legislated, such as longer school days, more homework, and incentives for superior teachers" (Goldberg, 1984, p. 6). The Commission on Excellence (1983B), for example, claims that 42 states recently initiated curriculum reform efforts, 44 examined graduation requirements, and 42 addressed issues having to do with teacher certification and preparation. Education Week reports that in the area of instructional time alone, seven states have adopted measures to extend instructional time, ten are considering actions which would extend the school day or improve instructional time, sixteen are discussing the extension of the school year -- an action already taken by North Carolina, and ten are contemplating limitations on extracurricular activities (Walton, 1983). And in the area of curriculum, a thirty-six state survey conducted by the National Conference of State Legislatures

indicates that the most frequent legislative initiative in 1983 involved strengthening basic course requirements with eleven states introducing legislation to require additional coursework in math, foreign language, computer literacy, and/or English (Siegel, 1983). There are also estimates that 30 states are now developing guidelines on computer literacy for teachers. Overall, it is estimated that 104 state-level commissions to study aspects of school improvement have been established since 1980; 54 have been formed during 1983 alone (Walton, 1983).[8]

The correlation between these initiatives and the recommendations of the Commission on Excellence is quite high. But the question remains whether such school improvement efforts will yield the excellence in education the Commission and others desire. Unfortunately, changes of this legislative, policy type are more likely to create the illusion of moving toward excellence than they are to actually result in significant improvement. Even worse, however, -- perhaps because such changes also give the appearance of being relatively straightforward with few secondary consequences -- they can even have an unforeseen negative impact on the quality of education. Consider, for example, the recommendation that requirements in the "new basics" be raised in accordance with the Commission's recommendation: 4 years of English; 3 years each of mathematics, science, and social studies; and one-half year of computer science. Although reflective of a rather simplistic "more is better" approach, a recommendation of this type appears reasonable, particularly to a public concerned with the inability of its children (and adults) to read, write, and compute. Upon the release of A Nation at Risk, the clamor for the adoption of this particular basics-oriented recommendation was especially loud and strong -- and only became louder and stronger when the National Center for Education Statistics released its finding that only 2.6 percent of 1982 graduates actually met these requirements (Sweet, 1983).

Responding to this (and other) pressure, 26 states have established more demanding requirements for high school graduation and recommendations to raise graduation requirements are being considered by 24 other states (Walton, 1983). However, in response to proposed legislation to increase high school requirements to 3 years each of science and mathematics for all Florida students, a Florida ASCD Policy Task Force (1983) concluded

> that the short-range impact of requiring three years of mathematics and science will be to decrease the achievement of college-bound students in these subjects as a result of employing additional math and science teachers -- most of whom will not be qualified -- to meet the requirement. The overall effect may well be to reduce the caliber of mathematics and science teachers in Florida high schools (p. 40).

The group also warned of a possible increase in the drop-out of non-college bound students unable to meet the new requirements. In other words, in the short term, college bound students would be

harmed and non-college bound students might or might not be harmed, depending on their ability to adjust to new requirements which would essentially place them in college preparatory science and math courses. And in the long term, the group concluded that the requirement's impact

> will depend on whether some of the fundamental problems of teaching mathematics and science are solved...If the present action follows historical precedent...once the requirement is legislated the problem will be presumed to have been solved (p. 40).

This suggests, among other things, that an automatic adoption of the Commission's -- and others' -- recommendations without adequate analysis not only may not result in excellent education, but could, in fact, yield unexpected negative outcomes which are in contradiction to what is intended. It further suggests that an uncritical, unexamined acceptance of the recommendations of such commissions and task forces is not the most appropriate way of approaching and using the reports they issue to improve education. Rather, such reports should be viewed as catalysts for change, generators of support and enthusiasm for school improvement, indicators of potential weaknesses and public and political areas of concern and interest, and sources of ideas and suggestions for ways to raise the quality of education. They offer a place to begin the long process of improvement -- but not an end in themselves.

If they become more than this -- if they are given undeserved credibility simply by virtue of their status - and their recommendations are taken as "truths" worthy of automatic enactment, then their impact can as easily be harmful as helpful to education. While skeptics and cynics often dismiss commissions as being essentially harmless because of their lack of substance, their impact may, in fact, hold potentially negative consequences. Automatic responses to recommendations which ignore the realities of schooling and the context in which it occurs can result in a variety of negative outcomes as, for example:

- Implementing policies and programs which are inappropriate or ill suited to the particular school or community. Schools are at what might be called different "stages of development" in their ability to respond to recommendations for improvement. For example, a school struggling to operate with severe financial constraints, discipline problems, skyrocketing drop-out rates, poor quality teachers and administrators, and so forth is most assuredly not in the same position to implement the suggested recommendations as is a school not facing such problems.

- Ignoring consequences which could be negative or counterproductive. Regulatory changes that involve the immediate -- rather than gradual -- increase of graduation course requirements and/or grade point averages for participation in extracurricular activities, could, for

example, result in higher drop-out rates of students unable to meet the new requirements.[9] Unless the problem of teacher shortages is addressed prior to increased course requirements, requiring additional courses for graduation could also result in the use of unqualified teachers, larger class size, students placed in classes inappropriate for their level of mastery of the material, etc.

- Creating the illusion of change. A number of policy-related changes designed to respond to recent recommendations are particularly likely to result in only illusory school improvement. Raising the graduation requirements from three to four years of English, for example, without improving the content and instruction in such classes, only gives the impression of improving the level of educational attainment. It is unlikely that students who did not learn English in three years will suddenly become experts with a fourth year of "more of the same." Similar illusions of improved education are likely to be created by extending the school day and/or year when such actions are not accompanied by substantial changes in what actually occurs in the classroom.

- Derailing existing improvement efforts. A substantial number of schools, districts, and states were in the midst of their own school improvement efforts at the time the Commission on Excellence set into motion the national call for excellence. There is evidence to suggest that rather than incorporating the Commission's recommendations into existing improvement plans, energies were redirected to create new efforts in response to public presssure generated by the reports. Well planned efforts were weakened or even lost in the redirection.

- Counteracting (or losing) gains made in other educational areas. There is considerable concern that the recent push for excellence will result in ignoring other priorities in education, particularly equity. Although almost all the commissions, task forces, and study authors have mentioned the importance of educating "all" students, the concern is clearly with achieving excellence. Contrary to the apparent attitude of the current administration in Washington, a strong argument can be made that equity and excellence are inclusive rather than exclusive concepts. However, there is evidence to suggest that the emphasis on excellence can be used to produce budget and policy decisions which endanger the gains made toward achieving educational equity.

- Channeling scarce dollars to high visibility, high cost initiatives with little evidence of effectiveness. In a survey of 28 school districts throughout the country, the American Association of School Administrators (1983) found that to implement only two of the Commission's recommendations -- market-sensitive teachers' salaries and longer school day (7 hours) and year (200 days) -- would require the addition of $591 million to the 28 districts' $2,194 million combined budgets. Odden (1984) estimates that

the cost of extending the school day from 6.5 to 8 hours would be in excess of $20 billion, as would lengthening the school year from 180 to 220 days -- a $40 billion price tag for one recommendation, with little evidence, as Odden points out, to support the claim that education will even improve as a result.

- Redirecting energy away from what we know works in improving schools to focus on politically sensitive rhetoric. The rush to react to political and public pressure for excellence has pushed particularly state legislatures to enact measures which do not appear to have benefited from what research has taught about how to achieve lasting school improvement. Unfortunately, the presentation and discussion of most of the commission and task force reports of educational problems and the solutions proposed to resolve them enhances this climate of benign neglect of research, channeling attention away from what is known about school improvement to focus more on opinion and rhetoric.

This latter negative aspect of commissions and task forces is of particular concern since research on school improvement has reached a level of sophistication where a substantial amount is understood about how and in what ways schools can raise the quality of the education they provide. In the following two papers, Cox, Loucks-Horsley, and Crandall will discuss the factors which have been shown to influence the success or failure of school improvement efforts and the ways in which school officials can move beyond the rhetoric to what is really important -- improving schools and raising the quality of education they provide.

Notes

[1]See, for example, David P. Crandall and Associates. People, policies, and practices: Examining the chain of school improvement, Volumes I-X. Andover, MA: The NETWORK, Inc., 1982.

[2]The reports and books that are referred to throughout the article include:

- A Nation at Risk, National Commission on Excellence in Education;
- Action for Excellence, Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, Education Commission of the States;
- Academic Preparation for College, Educational Equality Project, The College Board;
- Educating America for the 21st Century, National Science Board, Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology;
- Making the Grade, The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy;
- High School: A Report on Secondary Schooling in America, Ernest Boyer, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching;
- The Paideia Proposal, Mortimer Adler;
- A Place Called Schoool, John Goodlad; and
- Horace's Compromise, The Dilemma of the American High School, Theodore Sizer.

The primary emphasis, however, is on task force and commission reports rather than research-based (Boyer, Goodlad, Sizer) and theoretical (Adler) books. These latter books have gone well beyond the often superficial discussion of education found in many commission and task force reports to paint capitivating portraits of the complex nature of schooling and creatively explore alternative educational possibilities.

[3]See, for example, Sara Lake. The educator's digest of reform: A comparision of 16 recent proposals for improving America's schools. Redwood City, CA: San Mateo County Office of Education, 1984; K. Forbis Jordan. Comparison of recommendations from selected education reform reports. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1983.

[4]As Harold Howe (1983) has pointed out, "all the recent reports and studies recognize in general terms that disadvantaged and minority students have special needs, but they all stop with such generalities" (p. 171).

Unfortunately, educational equity concerns are given almost no attention by the majority of commission and task force reports. In some instances, the mention of equity issues gives the impression of being more taken in nature than sincere.

[5]This recommendation involves seven "sub" recommendations concerning teacher preparation and the teaching profession. See A Nation at Risk (1983), pp. 30-31.

[6]Peterson focused on the six reports issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Education Commission of the States, Business-Higher Education Forum, Twentieth Century Fund, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and National Science Board.

[7]These constraints or "realities" -- realities which many, though not all, the reports ignored -- define the context in which the recommendations are to be implemented, determining at least in part, if not entirely, the appropriateness and feasibility of the changes required by the various recommendations.

[8]Estimates of state-level commissions continue to expand each month.

[9]According to Howe (1983), "one of the dangers inherent in all the recommendations for more demanding courses and higher standards is that these more rigorous requirements will be insensitively applied and will force more young people out of school altogether . . . . It is possible to raise academic standards in high schools without rejecting large numbers of young people, but the difficulties of doing so are insufficiently recognized in many of the new reports" (p. 172).

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